

International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations*

31 July to 3 August 2001
Tokyo and Kyoto



United Nations
University

CONFERENCE REPORT

Introduction

The *International Conference on the Dialogue of Civilizations* was held from 31 July to 3 August 2001 in Tokyo and Kyoto. Experts from academia, politics and other walks of life came together to jointly tackle the questions at the core of the UNU Project on the Dialogue of Civilizations (see <http://www.unu.edu/dialogue>): What are the prerequisites of a meaningful dialogue? And how can we best facilitate it?

With over 40 speakers from 23 different countries (see list at the end of this report), the conference gave a clear picture of the many aspects that are involved in a meaningful dialogue of civilizations. It showed that even for those who have been much involved in issues of dialogue, discussions are not always easy, in particular when they touch upon specific values and norms. It also very clearly proved, however, that as long as there is agreement among all parties involved that it is better to talk than to fight each other, dialogue is possible and actually leads to new and creative solutions to the common problems facing mankind.

The Conference explored the Dialogue of Civilizations from various perspectives:

- Promoting dialogue among civilizations
- Lessons from history
- Multicultural society and cultural transformation
- Perspectives from Asia
- Universality versus Particularity?
- Understanding different civilizations
- Political aspects of the Dialogue among civilizations

The main observations and recommendations made from each of these perspectives are outlined in this report. The report does not aim to follow the order of the presentations¹, but rather intends to highlight the linkages between the different contributions, drawing also on the discussion sessions during the conference and comments received thereafter.

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¹ The programme of the conference as well as full texts and video recordings of presentations can be accessed from <http://www.unu.edu/dialogue/programme.htm>.

A. Promoting dialogue among civilizations

1. Based on the understanding that cultural diversity is a source of strength, not a cause for division and confrontation, the opening session of the conference set the frame for the ensuing discussions by defining what is meant by “dialogue of civilizations”, why it is essential to strengthen such dialogue at this point in history, and by exploring the perspectives for an enhanced dialogue.

2. There was broad agreement that what sets a “*dialogue*” apart from a “debate” or from “negotiations” is the fact that its goal is not to make one’s opinion or viewpoint prevail over another, or even to always reach a consensus. Rather, dialogue aims at better mutual understanding: of the values, norms, historical experience and cultural reality underlying the words and actions of others. Once knowledge takes the place of pre-conceived opinions, stereotypes and prejudices about others, “otherness” will be perceived less as a threat than as an enrichment in the sense of offering different outlooks on the world around us.

3. In order to enter into such a dialogue, one has to be prepared to exercise tolerance towards other ways of thinking, towards people who base their daily lives on values and experiences other than our own, as for example would be the case when followers of monotheistic religions discuss the foundations of their spirituality with followers of polytheistic religions. But tolerance alone is not enough: equally important is the notion of “respect” – for others as well as for oneself. While tolerance means to let others do as they please, “respect” actually attaches a positive value to what one is or does – respect thus goes beyond mere tolerance.

4. In the context of the Dialogue of Civilizations, the term “*civilization*” cannot be used to refer to a dominant power at a certain point in history, as this would imply that there never exists more than one civilization at a time – how could there be a dialogue? Rather, “civilization” refers to the cultural characteristics of a particular time or place, and in this sense can well be replaced by the term “culture”: Culture as the root of an individual’s identity, but also as the essence of global humankind.

5. In other words, to avoid limitations to the discussion on, and practice of, the Dialogue of Civilizations, “civilization” or “culture” should be understood rather loosely to refer to groups of people who share certain ways of organizing their societies - the traditions and values underlying their social, political and economic institutions in the broadest sense - and not as entities defined solely by religion, state boundaries, or economic and political dominance. As the UN Secretary General has repeatedly stated, such a broad view is necessary in order to avoid that the discussion of dialogue among civilizations actually reinforces barriers to dialogue, instead of bringing them down.

6. “Dialogue of Civilizations” then refers to the act of listening to the beliefs, judgments, worries of people not only with a different cultural, ethnic, or religious background, but also with different political convictions, social positions and economic

power. Civilizations, however, are abstract entities. The actors of a dialogue of civilizations will always be individuals, whose ways of thinking and values are influenced by their civilizational background, and who engage in a dialogue with other individuals, whose identities again are shaped by many influences, including her or his socio-cultural, ethnic, religious background.

7. Inter-civilizational dialogue should be understood as an ongoing process in which the participants show not only a willingness to exchange information by sharing their own thoughts and listening to others, but also the openness to transform their own worldviews by integrating other perspectives into their own ways of thinking. The recognition of differences alone does not yet lead to mutual understanding. It is only through a genuine receptivity to other viewpoints that mutual appreciation occurs.

8. The Dialogue of Civilizations has great potential to help prevent conflicts - on the international, national and local levels - by reducing misunderstandings and mistrust, and by laying the basis for a non-violent resolution of controversies. It also has enormous potential to solve current and future economic, social and political problems by sharing experiences and through joint implementation of remedies.

9. At its best, inter-civilizational dialogue can result in a collective sense of shared goals, enabling us to address the most important issues of all: What kind of future world do we want to live in? How can we work together to solve the problems facing humankind today, and begin creating that future? This does not necessarily imply a common approach to every issue, but without such a constructive dialogue the future is less likely to become one that we would want. After all, we live in a world of great diversity, but a diversity based on shared values of tolerance and freedom; a world which is defined by its tolerance of dissent, its celebration of cultural diversity, its insistence on fundamental, universal human rights, and its belief in the right of people everywhere to have a say in how they are governed.

10. Actors on all levels of global society should join forces to effectively prepare the ground for a global “culture of dialogue” characterized by a strive for increased knowledge about different cultures; respect for other cultural value systems and tradition; a search for unity in diversity; the recognition that cultures and civilizations are dynamic; inclusiveness; and a readiness to transform on part of all partners to the dialogue. Arenas that most obviously lend themselves to such efforts are politics; the legal system; education; science; culture; and media and information.

B. Lessons from history

11. Dialogue among civilizations is not an invention of the 20th century. There have been numerous exchanges among civilizations in history, spanning all ages and all parts of the world. History also illustrates that civilizations, or cultures, are not static, and that their transformations have usually been linked to their encounter with other civilizations. In the study of the history of civilizations it is therefore most useful to look beyond the

developments taking place within the physical and temporal boundaries of individual civilizations and instead to focus on the spheres of inter-civilizational exchange, or "cross-civilizational spheres", where constant and durable intercourse has taken place over a certain period of time. Such cross-civilizational spheres can be found throughout all ages and regions accessible to historical examination, such as, for example, the "Mediterranean Cross-Civilizational Sphere" where Aegean, Greek, Byzantine, Egyptian, Phoenician, Syrian and Arabic cultures mutually influenced each other over a number of millennia, the "Silk Road Cross-Civilizational Sphere", where Persian and Chinese civilization were engaged in inter-cultural exchange from the 2nd to the 13th centuries A.D., or the "Indian Sea Cross-Civilizational Sphere", which provided a forum for intercourse between the Indian and Roman civilizations from the 2nd to the 4th century A.D.

12. In many instances, however, have the exchanges taking place within these spheres not been among equals, but were guided by the quest for economic, political, religious, cultural dominance of one culture or civilization over another. History is replete with examples of inter-civilizational encounters motivated in such a way which were accompanied by, or even ended in, conflict. Nevertheless, we also find numerous examples of successful dialogues: These are the dialogues where the quest for information, for knowledge was the guiding principle that led members of different civilizations to seek a discourse.

13. To arrive at a sound and just understanding of the history of civilizations and of the encounters that have taken place between them, it is necessary to conduct a systematic worldwide survey documenting the development of past inter-civilizational exchanges. Such a survey should focus on exploring in detail the reasons why some encounters have been successful, while others failed or had detrimental consequences for the parties involved. On this basis, it will be possible to draw conclusions for a better dialogue in the future. A historiography which aims at creating frames of reference for nationalism by demonizing others, or for the pre-eminence of one culture by focusing on what is "exotic" in other civilizations and cultures, is unsuitable for this task.

C. Multicultural society and cultural transformation

14. People have lived in multicultural settings from the beginning of recorded history, in rural as well as in urban communities. Ruling elites of one cultural, religious and linguistic background largely tolerated the existence of minority groups of other cultures and religions, and often with their own languages, within the boundaries of their territories, while trying to integrate these minorities into the mainstream culture. Changes in the ruling elites tended to affect the distribution of power within these multicultural societies, but did not change the basic pattern of multicultural coexistence coupled with the – more often than not unsuccessful – strive of the dominant culture to impose its values and norms on the minority groups.

15. During the 20th century, however, the ever accelerating speed of globalization, facilitated by the spread of modern transport and communication technologies, has

profoundly changed the framework of multicultural societies: The spatial pattern of distribution of people from very different backgrounds has become very complex as a consequence of accelerated migration. With the globalization of markets and information networks, consumption patterns and mass culture are becoming more and more uniform the world over. By the same mechanisms, however, has it become easier for migrants to preserve elements of their native culture while adjusting to life in their new living environment.

16. It is for above dichotomy of an increasing standardization of every-day culture on the one hand and the strive to retain elements of individual cultures on the other hand that the paradigm of the past: tolerance with the underlying aim of integrating minority cultures into the mainstream culture, has given place to the new ideology of “multiculturalism”, which tries to find ways to equally accommodate the values and norms of all cultural groups within the framework of a given society.

17. This normative concept of multiculturalism corresponds well with the characteristics of a dialogue of civilizations described above. It re-affirms the necessity to implement dialogue as the new paradigm of inter-cultural relations, while at the same time providing a training ground for communication across cultural or ethnic divides on the international level.

18. To put the ideology of multiculturalism to practice, it is essential to create the necessary pre-conditions for people from different backgrounds to live together peacefully and in a way satisfactory for all. Such pre-conditions include, as examples from South Africa and Europe have shown, a political system characterized by proportional representation, party coalition politics, and decentralized government structures; competent, neutral, responsive and accountable law enforcement agencies; and independent statutory bodies to monitor racial and other discrimination, which command the necessary search and seizure powers to ensure justice and fairness.

19. It is equally important to give every member of the multicultural society truly equal access to these institutions, including the ability to read the laws and to assert their rights in a language they are comfortable in. Here, education has a vital role to play.

20. It is also crucial that the multicultural structures of a society adjust to cultural change, including the changed values, norms and aspirations of the younger generations, just as cultures are flexible entities changing with time. Experiences with immigration in some European countries show that multiculturalism in the sense of creating societies within society for every social, political, religious, ethnic group without the translation of the basic principles of the society at large, in particular the liberalism that is at the very centre of the new multiculturalism, will be unsustainable in the long-term.

D. Perspectives from Asia

21. Asia covers a vast region and is highly diverse in terms of history, ethnicity, language and culture. It offers examples of inter-civilizational exchanges throughout its long, well-documented history, ranging from the dialogues between scholars from India, China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and the countries and regions of Western Asia on religion and ethics during the first millennium, the dialogue between Asian and Western countries imposed during the period of colonialism, to the contemporary situation, where interaction between the governments and people of Asia has reached an unprecedented scale. The Asian experience thus offers insights into various aspects of the Dialogue of Civilizations, among them: the role of religion, the relevance of education, and the possibilities philosophy offers to further the cause of the dialogue.
22. The most distinguishing characteristic of the colonial period in terms of inter-civilizational dialogue is that it in fact erected barriers for inter-Asian exchanges by entirely focusing the attention of actors in Asia on the metropolitan powers in Europe or the United States. This has led, among many other distortions, to a focus in education on “Western” perspectives on basically every subject of study as well as on “Western” educational principles. In recent years, however, countries in Asia have started to enlarge the frame of reference in teaching beyond the Western concepts of science, arts, history, social studies etc., and to teach other Asian languages along with Western ones.
23. Apart from thus increasing the knowledge base and the practical skills for inter-Asian inter-civilizational dialogue, students are offered an alternative to the uniformity of mass culture and thought propagated by mass media. In addition, the introduction of multiple frames of reference in teaching sensitizes students to the fact that every individual’s thinking and acting is informed by specific cultural frameworks, and that it is a highly enriching experience to examine one’s own framework in the light of another.
24. In the post-colonial order of today, globalization has triggered a re-assertion of cultural and religious identity throughout the countries of Asia, encompassing Hindus, Buddhists, Muslim, and followers of other religions alike. Rather than fostering dialogue, this religious re-assertion more often than not has resulted in an exploitation of religion for political reasons, especially in times of political and economic crises.
25. Apart from examples of religious re-assertion leading to the practice of blaming members of other religions for problems stemming from non-religious causes, however, there is in fact much to learn from Asian experiences in facilitating inter-faith dialogue. Such a dialogue, in the true sense of the Dialogue of Civilizations, aims to deepen understanding and to encourage respect and tolerance among different religions by encouraging people to openly communicate about religion on the intra-communal level as well as on the inter-communal level, with a distinct focus on the substantive, and not the symbolic, dimension of religion. Such inter-religious dialogue is based on the recognition of religious diversity, and it should aim to create tolerance and respect among religions by exploring their similarities as well as their differences.

26. In the sphere of philosophy, a careful re-examination of concepts and ideas developed in Asia from non-Asian perspectives, along with a reassessment of non-Asian concepts and ideas in the light of Asian thought, can lead to creative and forward-looking answers to many questions facing humankind today. The Aristotelian “logic of the subject”, for example, is a notion disconnected from place and time, and thus fails to lay the foundations for a socially and ecologically sustainable society. The “logic of place” developed in Japan, on the other hand, refers to the dependence of individual identity to its specific environment. It is, however, inherently ethnocentric and as such fails to accommodate peaceful coexistence of different cultures. A combination of the two, however, may well show the way to overcome the “dead ends of modernity”.

27. Political and civil society actors around the world should study Asian experiences in introducing multiple frames of reference in teaching and in the facilitation of inter-faith dialogue in order to identify best practices useful in creating the prerequisites for a meaningful dialogue of civilizations in their own areas of responsibility.

28. Programmes should be established to promote the comparative study of ethics and philosophy. Individual projects carried out within these programmes should bring together experts from different cultural backgrounds, who should not act solely as representatives of scholarship on a particular ethical system, but should engage in a genuine comparison of their interpretations of a variety of ethical systems.

E. Universality versus Particularity?

29. “Universality” and “particularity”, often used to refer to two opposing, and irreconcilable, concepts of the validity of values and norms, in fact are not mutually exclusive. Quite to the contrary: Although differences in language are often quoted as the central obstacle to the universal validity of specific ideas, a thorough inspection of the real world facts to which specific terms in different languages refer reveals much similarity, reducing the particularity imposed by language to a purely semantic one.

30. A pluralistic view of human identity helps to illustrate how universality and particularity coexist at all times: Every person or social group in fact reflects a multiplicity of traditions and cultures. For this reason, all individuals differ in some respects, but in other regards have much in common. Herein lies the basis for dialogue, and at the same time its goal: To discover what one has in common with members of other cultures, religions, ethnic, social or political groups, and on this basis to develop a feeling of joint responsibility for future generations, based on people’s increased awareness about the common ethical principles underlying their specific value systems and the common cultural features and similarities in values among different civilizations.

31. A similarly pluralistic view is useful when examining the competing claims of a universal validity of human rights and the assertion of cultural relativism. Again, both exist, and a careful distinction serves to advance the cause of the dialogue of civilizations: Human Rights are a universal norm in the sense that they have a quality

which makes them worthy to be made valid everywhere. Cultural norms, on the other hand, are based on empirically assessable conditions under which a certain group of people organizes their society. Universal norms ensure that dialogue is possible in the first place: Sometimes referred to as a “global ethos”, universal norms highlight the basic desires and aspirations all humans have in common and as such, in a very practical way, form the basis to promote understanding and tolerance through dialogue where cultural norms seem to clash.

32. To develop a global ethos, it is necessary to reach consensus on which norms are universal and which norms are cultural and specific. It is of utmost importance that this process of elaborating which norms and values are of such a nature that universal adherence to them would be a goal is open and inclusive, carefully containing attempts at “globalizing” the specific value systems of those currently in power politically or economically. Any social or cultural group should be able to join the dialogue and contribute to the process of defining the global ethos.

F. Understanding different civilizations

33. A number of concrete methods and practices have proven helpful when engaging in an exploration of different civilizations. A basic, though all too easily neglected prerequisite for a respectful dialogue between members of different civilizations, for example, is the recognition that no judgment should be made about the norms of other cultures unless one has first critically examined similar norms within one’s own culture.

34. In some instances, it may prove helpful, if not even essential, to involve a mediator in inter-civilizational exchanges about highly contentious issues. Such mediators could be individuals taking part in the actual direct exchange between members of different civilizations, offering interpretations of the issues at stake against the background of their own experiences in order to soften the impact of a direct confrontation. They could also render their services in a more indirect manner, by facilitating access to information about other cultures through the translation or dissemination of original sources.

35. Built on the same basic idea as the concept of mediation – the use of an additional frame of reference to arrive at a more objective judgment of other cultural values and norms than would be attainable by simply comparing them to one’s own – is the method of “triangulation”. It suggests that when embarking upon inter-civilizational dialogue, there should always be a minimum of three members of just as many different civilizations involved. This way, each cultural norm expressed by a member of one civilization is examined from the perspectives of more than one other cultural frame of reference, thus greatly enhancing the objectivity of the exchange.

36. All actors engaged in the promotion of a dialogue of civilizations should at all times be critically aware of the cultural norms underlying their own values and assumptions and be prepared to invite third parties to a dialogue to widen the frame of reference in each inter-civilizational discourse.

G. Political aspects of the Dialogue among civilizations

37. The great potential of the dialogue of civilizations to promote peace and to enhance the problem-solving capacity of nations and the international community was pointed out earlier. There is, of course, yet another political dimension to the dialogue of civilizations: to explore what politics can, and should, do to foster the dialogue.

38. The role of politics in realizing the aims of the dialogue of civilizations is pivotal: While it is a fact that actual dialogue will be carried out by individuals – including, but by no means limited to, politicians and government officials – it is largely in the hands of political actors on all levels, from the local and national to the regional and international arenas, to create an environment conducive to inter-civilizational encounters that lead to a meaningful dialogue.

39. First and foremost, there has to be the political will, on all levels of politics, to take action to foster inter-civilizational dialogue on a continuous basis. This political will is expressed in the determination to preserve cultural diversity, and the resolve to counter ignorance, intolerance and discrimination on racial, political or social grounds at all times.

40. Guiding principles of such political action should be mutual respect, an adherence to the rules of democratic process, the rule of law, and a commitment to pluralism by ensuring the participation of all groups of society – local, national or international – in the dialogue. Particular emphasis should be placed on the involvement of those often under-represented in political decision making, among them specifically women and the young generations.

41. The role of the international community is, above all, to set an example in inter-civilizational dialogue by jointly taking up the challenge, and showing the necessary determination and patience, to provide globalization with a human face: by firmly asserting, not only in words but also through their actions, that it is precisely the diversity of cultures which forms the foundation for human well-being and affluence, and that this diversity can only prevail in an atmosphere of equality, which includes, as a prerequisite, a balanced form of development.

42. Regional organizations have a vital role to play in the dialogue of civilizations, as they not only foster exchange and cooperation within their regions, but provide important stepping stones for the dialogue between regions. Regional, together with international organizations, should also step up their efforts to provide increased opportunities for direct intercultural experiences: through exchange programmes in the fields of culture, academia, the media and other professions.

43. National governments should show a firm commitment to the preservation of all cultural heritage – popular or traditional, mainstream or minority – within their

jurisdictions. They should be aided in this effort by the international community, and by the international organizations it has created for such purposes. One important means to do so is to reform the way history is studied and taught: each culture or cultural group within a society should have the means to assert its right to write its own history, thereby enriching the pool of historical knowledge with a diversity of viewpoints reflecting the diverse reality of our world.

44. National and local governments also, and most importantly, have the responsibility to ensure that all groups within their societies enjoy equal access to education, information and political decision making. A basic prerequisite for this is the eradication of illiteracy, the major obstacle to an active assertion of human rights, including the rights to political participation. It is also the responsibility of national and local governments to encourage and facilitate the acquisition of what has come to be termed cultural and ethical literacy: the ability to communicate in foreign languages, and the capacity to appreciate cultural diversity while firmly retaining the roots of one's own identity. Long-lasting education is the key to the attainment of these crucial skills, laying the basis for meaningful dialogue leading to mutual understanding among people from very different geographical, ethnic, religious, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

45. A level of political action of high importance is the local one. After all, dialogue is of most immediate importance to those who live and work in close proximity, who experience the challenges of living in diversity on a daily and very personal basis. It is this level where the actions taken on the international, regional and national stages to prepare the ground for dialogue have to prove their effectiveness. Community leadership will be important to initiate and to maintain the process of dialogue within the community, again preparing the ground, and providing the thrust, for dialogue at the other levels of the global society.

Note

The observations made, analysis undertaken and recommendations given during the conference, along with the results of five workshops organized by UNU within the framework of the UNU Project on the Dialogue of Civilizations, have been translated into a Framework for Action to be submitted to the United Nations General Assembly in time for its deliberations on the Dialogue among Civilizations later this year. The draft text will be available on the UNU Dialogue of Civilizations website (see below) soon.



<http://www.unu.edu/dialogue>

Conference Participants (Speakers, Discussants, Chairpersons)

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Richard EVANOFF	Professor, Aoyama Gakuin University
Vigdis FINNBOGADOTTIR	Former President, Republic of Iceland; Chair, Council of Women World Leaders
Andre Gunder FRANK	Professor, Florida International University and University of Nebraska
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